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Urban Youth in Community Service: Becoming

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Ever since Williams James called for American youth to be enlisted in "a moral equivalent of war" more than 80 years ago, youth service, in its many forms, has been a recurring issue for public debate. Youth service programs can be school-based or offered through non-school groups. Some function only in the summer. Programs can also operate for out-of-school youth, as the youth corps, and can be residential.

The programs go by several names, among them experiential learning, service learning, and voluntary youth service. Each type is distinct, but the following discussion looks at the field broadly, with some examples of the range of programs available for urban youth.

GENERAL CIVIC INVOLVEMENT OF URBAN YOUTH

Most young people, wherever they live and no matter what their socioeconomic status, are not involved in community service regularly or even occasionally (People for the American Way, 1988). However, African American students, surveyed as tenth graders in 1990, performed more community service regularly than did any other racial group. Students in urban schools also had a slightly greater rate of participation than those in suburban or rural schools. Still, regular participation is low--11 percent for blacks, 9 percent for urban students. It was only 7 percent for all tenth graders.

An earlier study found that urban schools themselves do not push civic involvement; of the 44 urban school systems surveyed, only six kept records of students who registered to vote, and only seven offered incentives for registration (People for the American Way, 1988). Black and Hispanic students graduating from high school are poorly informed about civic responsibility: only 23-29 percent of minority students reached the third of four proficiency levels in civics as seniors, compared to 55 percent of whites (NAEP, 1988).

Despite these findings, many national, state, and local groups view service programs as "hooks" for engaging low-income urban youth in positive actions and for linking classroom learning to their future options. Indeed, a national program of voluntary service has been suggested as a way of preventing dropping out of school (Sherraden, 1991). Instead of becoming dropouts, youth could become national service participants and move back and forth between service and school programs. Moreover, participation

in service programs can foster self-esteem and a sense of belonging to and responsibility for their communities in urban youth.

SPECIAL ISSUES IN URBAN PROGRAMS

Many urban youth feel alienated and hostile toward their community and toward institutions in particular (McGillicuddy, 1991). Thus, community service can become equated with institutions of which they disapprove and be difficult to "sell" as something worthwhile. When community service is mandatory, as in the state of Maryland and in cities such as Atlanta and Detroit, parents and students sometimes complain that service requirements detract from the time needed for paying jobs. Another issue unique to low-income urban youth is possible payment for community service. Many of the most successful programs provide stipends and/or education bonuses. In the past few years urban programs have leaned toward youth corps for out-of-school young people. Corps tend to segregate low-income participants into experiences directed more at job preparation than at civic service (Lewis, 1988). While they provide comprehensive, practical experiences for urban youth, they focus on rehabilitating those at risk. School-based community service in the suburbs, by contrast, tends to be more focused on the altruism inherent in community service. But these programs also lack participant diversity. A policy issue for program developers, then, is to figure out how to bring young people from different types of communities together through their service work.

BENEFITS OF URBAN SERVICE PROGRAMS

No matter what type of youth service is studied, the research on the benefits is consistent across socioeconomic groups. Well-designed service learning promotes academic achievement, competence, self-confidence, and self-esteem. It creates empathy for others and builds skills in problem solving and in working cooperatively (Grant Commission, 1988). Service opportunities stimulate skills specifically useful for future employment--skills which many urban youth do not see modeled in their neighborhoods--punctuality and reliability, responsibility for task completion, getting along with others, and good grooming (Harrison, 1987).

IN-SCHOOL PROGRAMS IN URBAN SYSTEMS

The Federal National and Community Service Act, passed in 1990, is providing seed money, training, and research for programs throughout the country. Even before this investment, however, several urban districts had adopted their own policies and programs promoting youth service sponsored by the schools.

One of the early district-wide programs was that of the Atlanta public schools, Duty to the Community. Begun in 1988, it requires students to do 75 hours of unpaid community service during their high school years and to write an essay about it (National School Boards Association, 1987). Another mandated service program, at the Central Park

East Secondary School in New York City, includes many of the elements that proponents of youth service say are necessary for quality experiences: it is required of all students throughout their school years (grades 7-12, in this case), and is well-supervised at school and at the service sites.

A program initially involving two San Antonio school districts targets service opportunities at potential dropouts. The Valued Youth Partnership Program selects middle-school students, provides them with training to be tutors, and assigns them to elementary students needing help. The students receive stipends and rewards, such as a banquet and T-shirts. It has consistently reduced absenteeism and behavioral problems among participants and improved their academic records (Harrington & Schine, 1989), and has now expanded to five additional districts with help from the original sponsor, the Coca-Cola Company.

Another long-lasting, innovative program is the Early Adolescent Helper Program, started as a pilot project in 1982 and now involving more than 200 junior high school students in 14 New York City schools. The students provide child care in day care centers, tutor in after-school programs, and help senior citizens (Harrington & Schine, 1989).

The Youth Community Service program of the Constitutional Rights Foundation selects students who are not involved in school life to participate in service and, thus, build their leadership skills. Working primarily in schools serving low-income families in Los Angeles, the program gives students training in planning and organization, then helps them assume key roles in creating and managing service projects in their schools and communities (Herman & Burry, 1987).

OUT-OF-SCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS

Community service is an integral component of many youth-serving agencies in the inner cities, such as the Scouts; 4-H Clubs; Girls, Inc.; and Boys Clubs. Another example of a successful out-of-school managed program is MAGIC ME. A privately funded program started in Baltimore, it enrolls highly at-risk young adolescents in a service project where they visit and sponsor activities for residents of nursing homes (Rolzinski, 1990).

THE GROWTH OF URBAN YOUTH CORPS

Although some state-sponsored youth corps summer programs have enrolled a cross-section of youth, the major corps of the 1980s and now 1990s draw primarily from urban low-income, out-of-school youth. The first such urban youth corps developed in San Francisco, drawing its ideas from the very successful--though expensive--California Conservation Corps. The City Volunteer Corps in New York City soon followed. Its

enrollees work in both physical and human service sites, receive education programs tailored to their needs, (e.g., English as a Second Language or GED instruction); and earn a substantial education bonus at the end of a year's service, as well as weekly stipends. Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) and the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps, building on P/PV's work with an urban corps in Philadelphia, received funding to expand the corps to 12 additional urban sites in 1991. Research indicates that the conservation corps model has been successfully transplanted to the city and to the human services field, such as schools, hospitals, and senior citizen centers. Research on traditional conservation corps says that residential corps arrangements benefit only the most disadvantaged corps members (Branch et al., 1987).

THE FUTURE OF SERVICE FOR URBAN YOUTH

The National and Community Service Act, both through its grants and through giving visibility to youth service, already is stirring up greater interest in the multiple values of youth service beyond the contributions it makes to communities. Even without this support, however, there is sufficient research evidence and programmatic success with service programs involving urban youth to justify much greater attention to how they can help reinforce the goals of schooling and improve the neighborhoods around schools.

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